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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 002064

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IS](#) [GOI](#) [INTERNAL](#) [GAZA](#) [DISENGAGEMENT](#) [ISRAELI](#) [PALESTINIAN](#) [AFFAIRS](#)
SUBJECT: SHARON READY TO REPLACE WAYWARD MINISTERS OVER
DISENGAGEMENT

REF: A. TEL AVIV 2034

[1B](#). TEL AVIV 2031
[1C](#). TEL AVIV 1953
[1D](#). TEL AVIV 1845

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Richard LeBaron for reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

[11](#). (C) Summary. At the April 4 Cabinet meeting, PM Sharon invited two right-wing ministers to leave the coalition if they are not comfortable with its policies, demonstrating Sharon's confidence that Labor is waiting in the wings to replace these ministers' parties (ref A). Sharon's display of bravado also sends a signal to Likud disengagement opponents that he feels confident his plan will gain a majority of Likud support in the upcoming party referendum, thereby putting pressure on undecided or opposing Likud ministers to back the plan. The main wild card for Sharon continues to be AG Menachem Mazuz, who must decide whether to indict Sharon in the "Greek Island Affair." End summary.

Sharon and Olmert Take on Eitam and Elon

[12](#). (C) In a display of bravado and impatience with vocal disengagement opponents, PM Sharon reportedly announced at his April 4 cabinet session that those ministers uncomfortable with his unilateral disengagement plan "can get up and leave" the government. Sharon's outburst, as reported in the major daily Yedioth Ahronoth, was directed at National Religious Party (NRP) Minister of Construction and Housing Effi Eitam, whom Sharon accused of misrepresenting facts, including on Eitam's visits abroad. (Note: Eitam has been a vocal opponent of Sharon's disengagement plan.) Defending Sharon's criticism of Eitam, Deputy PM Ehud Olmert pointed out that it was "improper to criticize the PM in working visits abroad." National Union Tourism Minister Benny Elon, who has unabashedly criticized Sharon's plan domestically and abroad, defended Eitam, asserting that opponents could criticize the plan until it was adopted by the government. Referring to himself and Eitam, Elon added that "we will leave the government if the government's decision (on the plan) does not satisfy us." With that, Sharon responded "you really don't have to be here."

Referendum Campaign Heats Up

[13](#). (C) As lines in the sand are drawn by Sharon in his cabinet, Likud disengagement opponents are revving up a PR campaign to convince Likud members to vote against Sharon's plan in a party referendum to take place around mid-May (ref C). Two out of Likud's 14 ministers -- Ministers-without-Portfolio Uzi Landau and Natan Sharansky -- are spearheading the "no" campaign along with several Likud MKs. The Jewish settler movement and another Likud lobby are also reportedly organizing their own anti-disengagement campaigns, with one under the banner "Likudniks don't disengage." At the same time, D/PM Olmert announced on April 2 that he would be launching a campaign to gather support for the disengagement plan.

Comment

[14](#). (C) Sharon's raw exchange with Elon and Eitam indicates that he may be willing to take off the gloves as he enters the home stretch for his disengagement plan's survival and his own political survival in the face of a possible bribery indictment. As Sharon made clear in his Passover interviews, he is counting on U.S. assurances gained during his April 14 meeting with President Bush to help him win the hearts and minds of Likud members in the upcoming referendum. With Likud rank-and-file support, he could then consolidate Likud ministerial support for his plan in a Cabinet vote. Sharon stated in his Passover interview with Ma'ariv that he already believes that FinMin Netanyahu "will ultimately support (the plan) as will many other ministers...." There is considerable speculation that Sharon has already worked out a deal with Shimon Peres for Labor to join with Likud after a cabinet vote approving the plan compels the NRP and NU to

leave the coalition (ref A). The only wild card for Sharon is AG Mazuz, who is now reportedly liable to take two months to reach an indictment decision, enough time, perhaps, for Sharon to shepherd his plan through the Likud, the government and perhaps the Knesset.

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LeBaron